



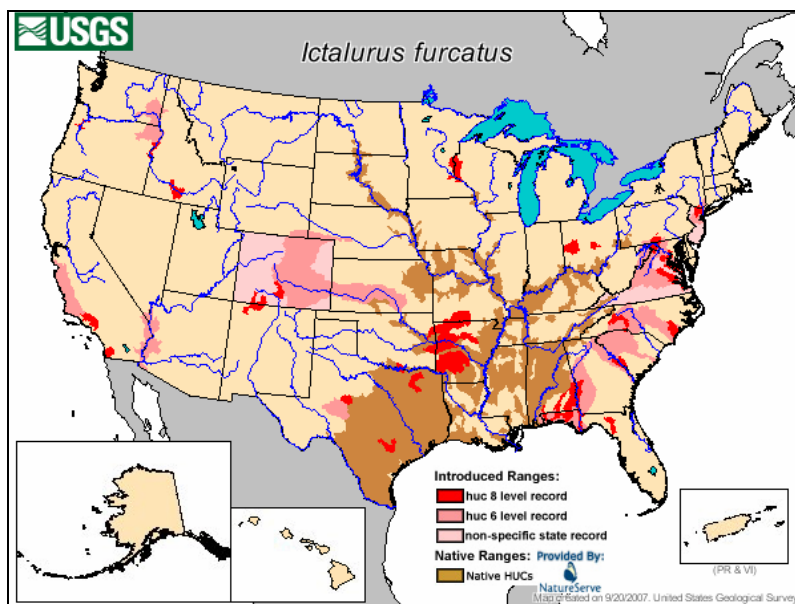
Tidal River Blue Catfish



While several of Virginia's tidal rivers offer excellent opportunities to catch blue catfish, the James River is recognized nationally for its trophy blue catfish fishery. Articles highlighting the world-class status of this fishery have appeared on Web-sites and in publications such as *In-Fisherman*. As a result, people from around the country are traveling to Virginia for guided James River Blue Cat fishing trips. A large component of the fishery includes anglers from nearby states and other areas of the Commonwealth who are traveling to localities (such as Richmond) near the James, spending vacation time and money to "fish the James". What draws these anglers is the opportunity to catch fish which regularly weigh-in in the 40 – 60 pound range. The current state record blue catfish, caught in the James River, weighed over 95 pounds, and was released back into the river.

Blue catfish are a large fork-tailed catfish species native to the Mississippi River drainage. They were first introduced to Virginia with stockings in the tidal James and Rappahannock rivers in the early 1970's. In 1985, a number of blue catfish were released in the Mattaponi River, and fish from this river eventually populated the Pamunkey River. Blue catfish have also colonized the Piankatank River and the tidal Potomac River system, and now occur in all of Virginia's major tidal tributaries to the Chesapeake Bay.

These introductions were not unique; blue catfish have been widely introduced throughout the United States.

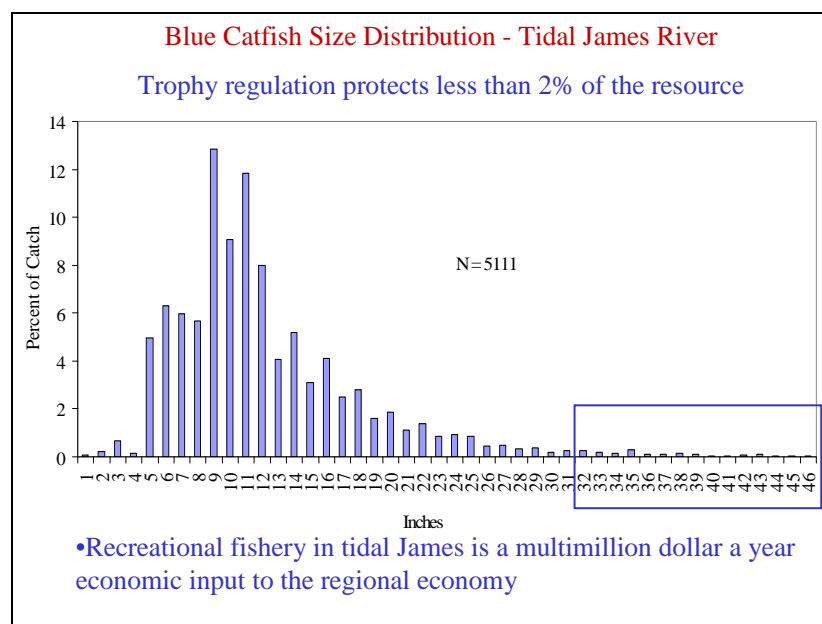


Several other important species have been successfully introduced in Virginia's tidal rivers over the years, including: channel catfish, common carp, largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, and bluegill. Channel catfish, introduced during the 1890's, are closely related to blue catfish.

At this point, it would be hard to overstate the abundance of blue catfish in Virginia's tidal rivers. According to records maintained by the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, in recent years, Virginia's tidal rivers have supported over 1.5 million pounds of commercial catfish harvest annually. However, while smaller-size blue catfish are very abundant, the number of large blue catfish available for trophy-oriented anglers is relatively low. Fish over 32 inches account for less than 2% of blue catfish found in the tidal James River, and less than 1% of blue catfish found in our other tidal rivers.

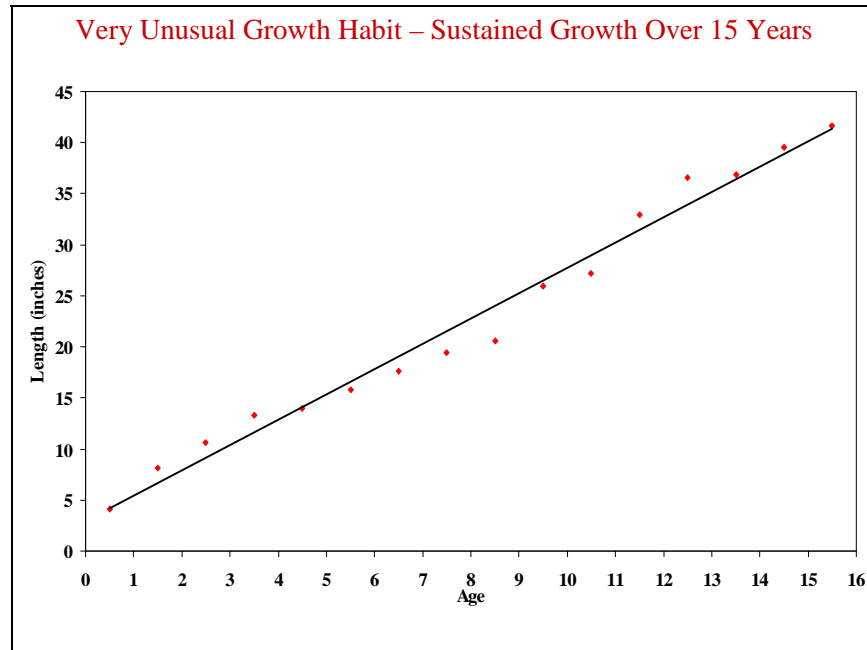
On July 1, 2006, a regulation went into effect limiting possession of blue catfish over 32 inches to one fish per person per day. Restricted harvest of large-sized fish will allow fish to be recycled – resulting in more fish living to achieve even larger sizes, and to be caught again. There remains no limit on harvest of blue catfish smaller than 32 inches from Virginia's tidal rivers.

What is the background behind the “32 inch regulation”? Trophy-oriented blue catfish anglers requested harvest restrictions on larger-sized blue catfish, with the hopes of seeing the trophy potential of their tidal river blue catfish fisheries continue to improve. These requests, when combined with the biological data, indicated a “trophy” regulation was warranted. Given the Virginia Department of Health's consumption advisory (no consumption of James River blue catfish over 32 inches, and one meal per month of fish caught from other rivers), a one fish over 32 inch regulation was deemed appropriate. The proposed regulation was coordinated with Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC) regarding potential impacts on the commercial fishery, and to verify that the regulation would apply to all, regardless of the method of harvest.

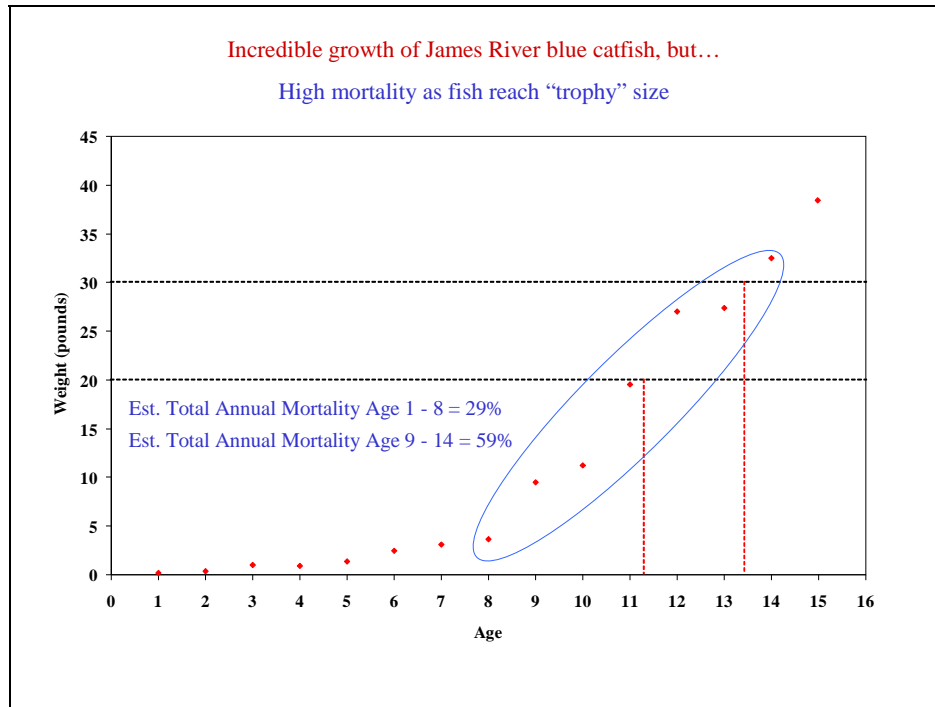


Ecologically, the trophy regulation is likely to have little, if any, impact. Blue catfish are known to be reproductively active at 17 inches – the regulation protects only a small fraction of the breeding stock. The incredible abundance of blue catfish under 32 inches, and year class strength variability, indicate the relatively small number of fish over 32 inches in these populations do not influence overall population size.

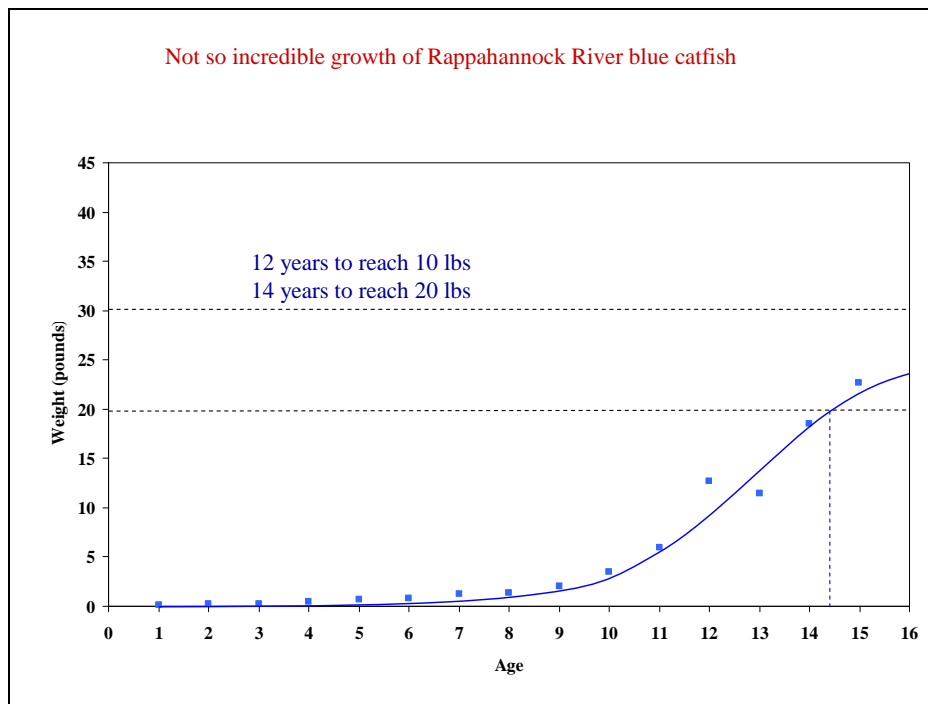
Blue catfish in these rivers steadily increase in length over a fairly long period of time (through age 15). However, they put on weight fairly slowly for the first several years of life, after which, as fish make a diet shift to larger, energy-rich, prey items, the rate of weight-gain increases dramatically. Blue catfish in the James River attain only 5 pounds on average by age 8. Then, with a rapid increase in growth, they average 10 pounds at age 10, 20 pounds at age 12, and 30 pounds at age 13. Fish in this population are known to reach 50 pounds by age 11, although age 13 – 14 is more typical.



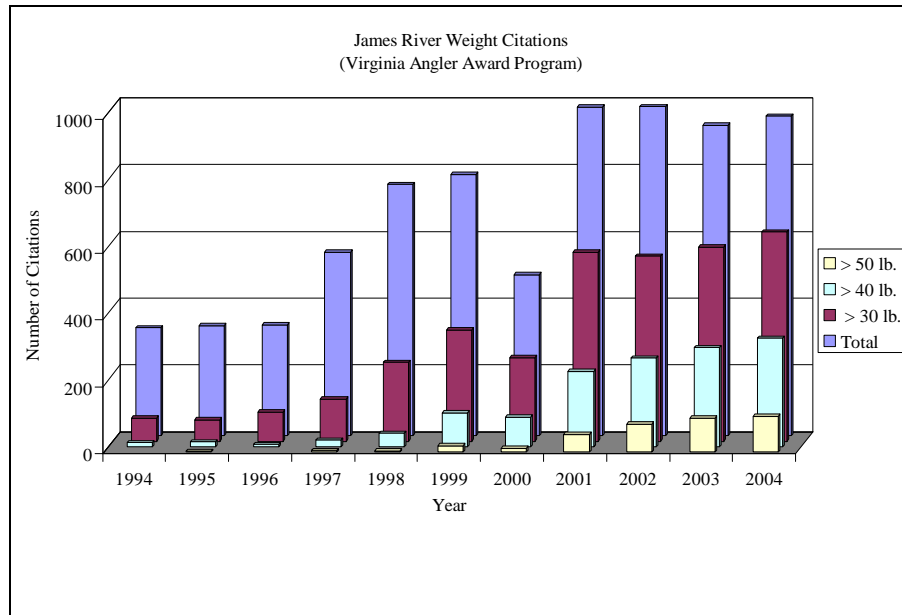
For fish age 1 – through age 8, total annual mortality is low – estimates are less than 30%. However, as these fish reach the age where rapid weight gain occurs, total annual mortality increases dramatically, approaching 60%. With this high level of mortality, harvest restriction is likely to benefit to the trophy aspect of the fishery.



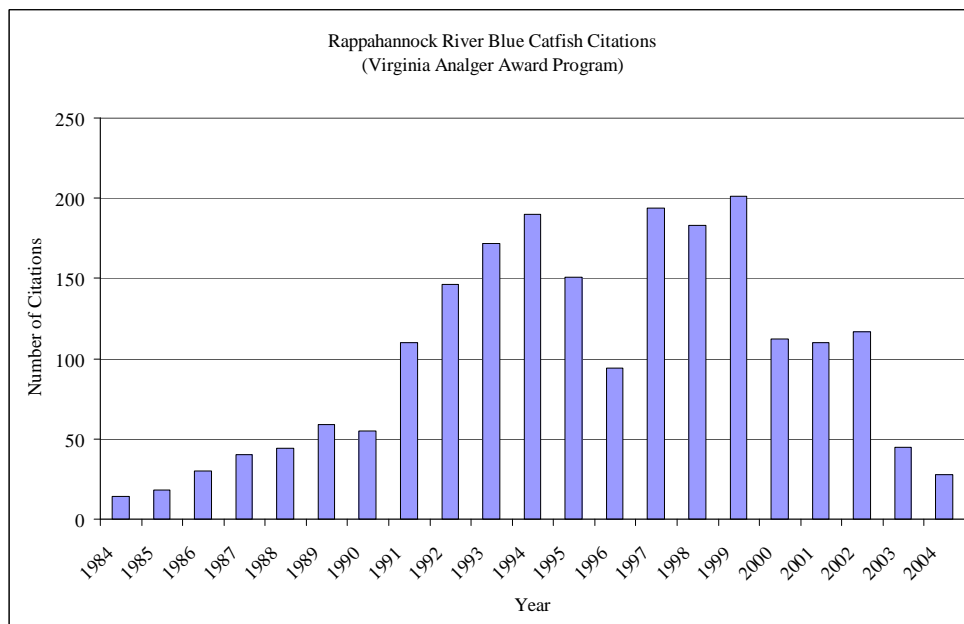
Whereas, the James is capable of producing “trophy” sized blue catfish in good numbers, the Rappahannock River has comparably slower growth, with fish generally not reaching 20 pounds until age 14. The average blue catfish in the Rappahannock would not achieve 30 pounds even if it were to live 20-plus years. The oldest blue catfish recorded to-date from Virginia was a 25 year old fish from the Rappahannock River.



Over thirty years after being introduced to the river, the blue catfish population in the tidal James and its tidal tributaries continues to expand. In the mid-1990's it was rare to catch a fish over 40 pounds, today fish to 60 pounds are abundant and it is the rare fish that weighs-in over 80 pounds.



As opposed to the James, the number of blue catfish citations issued each year for the Rappahannock River has declined precipitously since 1999. And, given the slow growth of blue cats in this river, any fish returned to the river, or recycled, as a result of the 32 inch regulation will be a plus for anglers hoping to catch a “trophy” fish.



Blue catfish in the Mattaponi and Pamunkey rivers grow as fast as those in the James River, these rivers are therefore capable of producing trophy sized blue catfish. However, as these are smaller river systems, the number of big fish available to anglers will not match the James.

Large blue cats prefer to feed on abundant schooling fish species, primarily gizzard shad, when they are available. Anglers use this knowledge of catfish feeding habits, fishing with fresh-caught gizzard shad, either in large chunks or whole, as bait when looking to land trophy-sized fish.

River Summaries

1 – James River and its tributaries: Virginia’s premier trophy blue cat fishery, with good numbers of fish to the 60 pound range, and fair numbers of fish to the 70 pound range. The state record fish weighing 95 pounds 11 ounces was caught in this river system. This fishery continues to improve year-to-year, and it is possible that it will one day produce fish over 100 pounds.

2 – Mattaponi and Pamunkey: Currently good numbers of fish to the 50 pound range, with anglers reporting the occasional fish to 80 pounds. These are fairly recently established populations, and, as with the James, the number and size of blue cats in these rivers continue to increase.

3 – Rappahannock River: Whereas this river produced good numbers of citations until the late 1990’s, today this river is not producing a large number of citation-sized fish. The trophy potential of this river is likely lower today due to reduced growth rates. However, as with Virginia’s other tidal blue cat fisheries, an abundance of smaller fish are available to anglers looking to take fish home to the table.

Bob Greenlee, District Fisheries Biologist
Virginia Department of Game & Inland Fisheries
(804) 829-6715